

The Woman's College of  
The University of North Carolina  
LIBRARY



CQ  
no. 478

COLLEGE COLLECTION

Gift of  
Kelly Cherry

CHERRY- KELLY: Benjamin John and Other Poems. (1967)  
Directed by: Mr. Fred Chappell. pp.60.

Benjamin John collapses time; the Lyric Cycle expands it. I've juggled time in these ways to explore the experience of time and to set up a tension between time as experienced and the real time which these poems themselves move through.

The psychology of time is not here an end in itself: my explorations of it are focused on Benjamin John and the woman of the Lyric Cycle. The end lies, I hope, in the credibility of these two characters as people and in their existence independent of mine.

In the third and last section of my thesis I use, instead, the direct monologue to describe my subjects.

Puns in these poems are more often than not sexual; each major metaphor unfolds or reverberates throughout each logical unit; and my imagery is, I hope, generally dramatic. These things also should contribute to my central aim: to the artful ordering of objective perceptions.

BENJAMIN JOHN

And Other Poems

by

Kelly Cherry

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
January, 1967

Approved by

Fred Chappell  
Director

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following  
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis  
Director

Paul Chappell

Oral Examination  
Committee Members

Arthur W. Dixon

James W. Gifford  
Gilbert L. Gifford

January 6, 1966  
Date of Examination

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the poems in this collection have appeared in  
Coraddi, The Greensboro Review, and The Carolina Quarterly.

## CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	v
A LYRIC CYCLE . . . . .	1
BENJAMIN JOHN . . . . .	11
AN OPPOSITION OF STARS . . . . .	50



## INTRODUCTION

1

Benjamin John is a narrative made up of lyrics in the present tense: But it covers a considerable length of time. The result is a collapse of time, or should be, so that the reader, at the end of it, wonders where Benjamin John's life has gone.

But the Lyric Cycle uses a static story line and a confusion in tense and address to do the opposite: So that although little or no time passes, the reader, at the end, feels, I hope, that at least a year has gone by.

I think these techniques, if indeed they do work, are more than mere tricks. The male sense of time seems to me often heavily weighted with a sense of bereavement. "It might have been" sums up Benjamin John's view of his life. I wished to collapse the time in his poems because these sad words are so by virtue of their utter inability to move within time.

The woman of the Lyric Cycle experiences time as history, however limitedly personal her sense of it may be. For her all time points to the past.

I saw him strip off his skin.

.....

But he says nothing at all,  
But floats above the air.

.....

I will remember you.

.....

When you have gone,  
the sun  
like a silent song  
will burn up the far side of night.

2

Benjamin John's Green Queen, unattainable in youth, matures with him in his imagination, to be comprehended finally only as an hermaphroditic old crone. She stands for his unarticulated ideals and for the dissipation of them brought slyly about by the attention that the mundane demands.

Benjamin John, rejected, retreated into dreams.

But the woman of the Lyric Cycle, after this jilting she suffers, assumes in response to it the stance of power that art will sometimes allow. She begins by hating as savagely as Sappho and ends by hating as cleverly as Circe.

Or as Shakespeare said, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

3

The last six poems are portraits of six people. I had hoped in them as in the other poems to subordinate, if not to erase, my own voice in favor of the subjects'. I feel that where I have been self-conscious I have failed; for I strongly suspect that one measure of the honesty of an artist's observation is the degree to which he has removed himself from his work.



A LYRIC CYCLE

"What of soul was left, I wonder,  
when the kissing had to stop?"

--Robert Browning

## SAPPHO

"When you left, I cried  
fiercely. Then I died.

"Will you suffer my sorrow:  
let me forgive you.

I will when the owl lights on the oak  
sweep with my brush your loose hair  
back.

"And love you in bed.

And wrap this sweet sheet  
round you, until you  
are dead."

## SEPTEMBER

The wet west wind wrapped

us up;

red leaves rained

down your back.

Oh, you--

I

know who you are,

dragon

dragging your muffled fires

through the chilled woods.

## IF YOU WERE AN ANGEL

If you were an angel,  
I would laugh you out of heaven,  
And set your hair on fire,  
And your black eyes burning  
Would bloom like a black flower.

## ROSES

As I was a child,  
You pampered me with roses.  
In this airless room,  
I shuffle their petals, and inhale  
Their thick, dull, deadly, pink perfume.

## COLD AIR

The colors of wind are cold.

On a cold night, I read  
Some books, and some books  
Are cold, but I read,

And in my head, I know I hear

Gray grating words  
Winged on an arctic wind.

He's absurd. . . .

## A SONG

How he loved me! trembled,  
if I touched his hand.  
I saw his quick eyes glittering  
in the night.  
I saw him strip off his skin.  
And white bones clattering,  
he fled into the night.



## BLUE AIR

Against the blue air,

He floats muter than a ghost.

I watch his wavering there,

Upon the air,

And wait for his words to fall

On me, words I want most.

But he says nothing at all,

But floats above the air.

## IN THIS PINK DAWN

In this pink dawn,  
My heart flares up and dies down.  
Bright wind crackles around my ankles.  
I held my tongue  
When you went away.

## MIDNIGHT

If I said I loved you,  
It was because I was bored.  
Or in an aimless moment,  
I may have caught the mood of the moon  
Making overtures toward a mockingbird.

## END OF SUMMER

I could have sworn

I saw the leaves

changing color,

the west wind torn

from the sky and bunched

into a cloud.

I could have sworn

you scorched my sleep

like lightning.

## CIRCE

"But as the fading sun clips you from my sight,  
I will remember you.

"When you have gone,  
the sun  
like a silent song  
will burn up the far side of night."

BENJAMIN JOHN

THE GREEK LINES

And one, bulky, stout in Stanley's mouth,

Together, they painted it red.

Smoking slugs into Stanley's jacket,

Benjamin said:

"In Athens I used to tell you,

Sometimes at the corner rink,

When I was a kid," and they nodded,

Remembered, over their drinks,

At this mention of death.

At this mention of death.

At this mention of death.

translation of Greek lines by Kenneth Rexroth

And one, bulky, stout in Stanley's mouth,

Smoking slugs into Stanley's jacket,

Benjamin said:

"In Athens I used to tell you,

Sometimes at the corner rink,

When I was a kid," and they nodded,

Remembered, over their drinks,

At this mention of death.

At this mention of death.

At this mention of death.



## THE LIGHTFOOT BOYS

He and his friends took the town;  
Together, they painted it red.  
Sneaking slugs into Stanley's jukebox,  
Benjamin John said:

"In Ithaca I used to roller-skate  
Sometimes at the corner rink,  
When I was a kid," and they slouched,  
Embarrassed, over their drinks,

At this mention of death.  
Then three struck out for Giorgio's,  
And two to Maggie's Meals,  
And one, sulky, stuck in Stanley's booth:  
Because things go hard with youth.

## BENJAMIN JOHN AND THE GREEN QUEEN

He nurses his pint on Washington Square.  
Plainly, the cops figure, this is a dare  
To be lightly taken.

Like a goggle-eyed rube he has been shaken  
Down, down. He was oh so sorely mistaken  
In highhanded Eileen,

Who, friend Curt called to say, last night was seen  
Twirling with Earl; her eyes outshone the green  
She fizgiggly wore,

And she was matchless. A fifth of a pint more  
To go: Benjamin John studies the stars  
As if to find

Some semblance to the image, in his mind,  
Keen, green, and warm. Now, conclude the cops: time  
They closed in.

Benjamin John, drunk, shamed, and elated,  
Cries to himself that God knows,  
The trouble he's seen nobody knows.

A pox on the Great Bear for its rutilant, lambent, polar light.

O to have been Ben ben Bijn!

AT THE CHURCH DOOR

At dusk, at last,

Spreading shadows across

The sky, the Milky Way

Shines to reveal

The stars and planets,

Right now,

And slowly, slowly

They, too, are changing

At the heavy years' hand,

As they are changed

Like an old

Man's hair

THE WIND FROM THE NORTH  
LIKE A HOOTOWL HAWKING  
HORSE SENSE PUTS HIM DOWN

He sits alone

Watching

For an hour of singing now

Against the stars,

Spoken out,

Lower like pioneer-pines waves

Whispering he'll know

Unlike,

A still small voice in the dark

Of his mind: rise in spring

To stir the like Oriental guerrilla

Break things.

## AT THE GREENSBORO ZOO

At dusk, at last,  
 Crawling crabwise across  
 The sky, the Milky Way  
 Readies to waylay  
 Coxcombs and ghosts,  
 Night owls,

And himself: caught  
 Cold, he shudders  
 At his twenty years' boasts,  
 At how he niggled, how  
 Like an ass  
 Stalled and brayed.

He jilts natural  
 Passions  
 For an insular singular nave:  
 Against this slate,  
 Sparked sky,  
 Leaves like priests'-palms wave:  
 Blessed he'll crouch  
 Cublike,  
 A still small voice in the dark cave  
 Of his mind: rise in spring  
 To sideswipe like Oriental guerrilla  
 Brash things.

A P.O.W. ASIAN WARLORD, ARISTOCRAT,  
SLIPS THIS POEM TO PFC. B. JOHN

1

Skirting this field  
Rain from the West  
Slapped those low hills  
Hemmed in by mist

2

Shoots of wild grain  
Spring up again  
  
The sun will shake off  
Outworn rag-ends  
Of clouds: as a moth  
Sheds its golden  
Spent chrysalis



...AND BENJAMIN JOHN  
LOOKS TO HIMSELF

The draft board said,

"You are wanted

Alive or dead."

Juggernaut Board

Mother

My friends

My foxy foe:

Let me protest

That I couldn't care less.

Hell like Heaven

Lies to the West.

## THE GETAWAY

East of the sun,

West of the moon,

South from Tennessee,

Benjamin John

Lies loafing; but the wide brass bed

Like a plumped-up anecdote

Seems to say,

"You are a dream-ridden fool

Who is no exception nor any rule."

Benjamin John,

Riding the fevers of 3 A.M.,

Yanks the top sheet over.

To this lackluster, easy, leggy girl

Stretched out in shadow,

He would say,

"Wash the anchovies,/While I pour the wine"

In the words of a crazy Greek,

Cynical, lyrical.

She sleeps in her grand and blockish bed,

Benjamin John.

O this dull indolence...

O this lack of clarity; fuzzy pretense...

Lack of rhythm, drama, sense...

He will pack his toothbrush;

Solo, straddle and spur a llama to Chile or Peru...

Mad as a hatter, like a child

He buries his face in her tangled hair

And wishes this small, wild prayer:

I'm hiding, I'm hiding, and no one knows where.

HIS FIRST EXPLORATION OF THE SEA  
MADE AT MIDNIGHT

Sportively,

he holds his breath: The bubbles spring  
lightly above his head, splicing  
the water-sheet. . . .

The firmament  
thus is rolled back; above him, cold  
is the airy aerie Heaven sent  
to taunt him in his discontent:  
From Chesapeake Bay upward, he sees  
stars, stars, stars.

Algae, fishes,  
scaly organisms sway, swat  
Benjamin John; he sees he's not  
a lonely monster. . . .

But comfort comes  
colder than Job's, like that: fished for,  
and mocked by the far, fair, and lum-  
inous lashes of the sleeping sun.  
A rocking in his stomach wrenches  
wry his soul.

O wretchedly  
he shoots for Up: The sandbank saves

his life! or less. His elbows graze  
the solid shore.....

But Paradise,  
the carrot strung before the beast,  
dangles still out of reach. He lies,  
sick and hungry, on the beach, sighs:  
Isn't he purged? Why does he dream  
wantonly  
of skin diving among the stars?

## THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Money! my honey,  
bangs the world around.

Ghosts of Veblen,  
ghosts of Marx,  
stalk the sun across that Yard.

## THE SUN

On any day with a very blue sky,  
the Blue Ridge swells  
from his rented book  
as a rose  
from his rent skull.



FOR ALICE, WHOM HE MARRIES ONE YEAR LATER:  
THE PROPOSAL

Long distance.

"How are you?" "Fine.

How are you?" "Fine."

Restlessly, restlessly,

Pines scrape the sky.

Silence. Then together.

"Sorry, you go on." "No,

You go on." "Sorry."

Looking off, he gathers

Night in his eyes.

In the dark room

He moves alone

Restlessly, restlessly.

Asleep he becomes

A drowned bird washed

Ashore, bill, plume

Pared to the bone,

A skeleton.

## SNOWFLAKES

Last night the Ides of March  
swooped,  
not softly, down and settled  
on his head; above the mean clack-cackle of wind he heard  
wings of birds white,  
shrill and unshakeable: chilled to the bone,  
he stationed his Florsheims on the furnace grate  
  
and snores past one,  
Monday: beyond the windowed bay  
stretch  
scores of dead Trumpeters, mute, who feather-footed fell  
Sunday.  
He wakes: Storm's died down,  
  
serves the damned storm right, and he notes:  
his slipsole scorched. O now see him  
blush like a green acolyte, and now  
gingerly he undertakes, obsequiously,  
  
shoveling of snow from off the front porch.

HE AND HIS WIFE  
ENTERTAIN CERTAIN OF THE FACULTY

They file in, vague or cheery, band  
By habit at the makeshift bar  
Where ill at ease his wife disbars  
(He knows) each from her no-man's-land  
And nods and chats and shoves caviar  
At them, since only the best is good  
Enough for those she "cannot stand."

He backs away from her trumped-up pride:  
Here are Thomson, Tucker,  
Moomaw, and Steve his usual friend;  
And he as well was once a fan  
Of the Fabulous Toad, Stealer of Motor Cars.

HE TEACHES IN A GIRLS' SCHOOL  
AND DELIGHTS IN HIS PUPILS

No sooner does spring invade  
The campus than everywhere  
In sleeveless dresses birds  
With Beatle pins, long hair,

Long arms, bare legs invite  
His interest: He rates  
Three pointed passes per day;  
How should he hesitate,

Figuring so in their dreams  
(Shy, defiant, designed),  
To take them, at face value,  
Pitching the Keynes he assigned

Aside. . . . Aside he turns,  
Sticking with the old high way,  
Mouthing the same old text:  
He's got, christ, bills to pay,

And his wife is due next month;  
And he has their themes to grade,  
Work to do. Work he meant  
To do, and plans mislaid. . . .

Half-heartedly, he upbraids  
Himself for wishing in vain;

These children, he knows, hang on him  
So long as he's unattained,

And chugging after the train  
Of his thought, he thinks he is wise,  
Distant, faithful: Lord, he deserves  
A gold star, a prize. . . . prize. . . .

The sun assaults his eyes. . . .

Crossing campus, he squints:  
The sun assaults his eyes. . . .

Sun-coppered arms, minted  
Days ago, surround him  
In the wilderness -- Pretty girls

Too young, too young, but then,  
Someone has to teach them.

## TO HIS DAUGHTER

Five years old:

Her dark hair holds

The light of the moon.

She scales his knee:

"If I should grow up,

Would you marry me?"

I will: but hurry,

I'll be a yellow, mellow, waning melody soon.

HE SUMMERS IN EUROPE BUT  
IN SECRET SEARCH OF THE GREEN QUEEN:  
NORFOLK FAREWELL

His wife: "Write often, lose weight.  
Your daughter'll be eight  
weeks older. Write often.  
Waves suck the hull of the ship."

Mr. John: "Goodbye. Goodbye."

Mr. John: "The hull of the ship."

Mr. John: "Waves suck the slow warm white sure hull."

His book he works on, time to time,  
not un-neatly packed, his three by five note cards  
stacked,  
he pushes off, off, off, off, off, charily heaving off  
from Norfolk's nestling June: there

\*\*\*

his old desire dizzy  
with the smell of dust and honey-  
suckle mingling day-  
dream and revenge  
drained his mind of memory  
stuffed it up with tissue  
stars lugged long



ago from N.Y.C. . . . fool, a  
fool, he groans,  
fool indomitably!

\*\*\*

Benjamin John: One tried and trying soul  
the wide north wind wrapped up  
--and shipped to sea--

\*\*\*

In his head her silk voice like a lead gong clangs. "Often."

## HIS WIFE'S BIRTHDAY

She sups with him and bravely smiles;  
And smiling back, he is perplexed  
By age, and by her tendered sex,  
By her loose dry skin, her juvenile  
Bangs; that her hair is dyed to a Greek  
Shade, her eyes are shadowed. How vexed  
He is at the unsucccess of her wiles  
  
Which yearly mocks him; her female fears  
Paraphrastic, harped on,  
Score his nerves like a scratched record  
Until in self-defense he is bored,  
Bored to tears.

## A THRENODY FOR THEORISTS

The leaves want raking; four o'clock settles  
A reddish glaze on the front-yard pinecones.

Benjamin John, slumped in his chair, scanning  
The headlines, works slowly on his whiskey sour,  
And frowns at statesmen and their paramours  
And sniggers at the rumors over Hanoi

Skeptically,

Unruffled,

As day by day the fallout climbs; and China,  
Spinning her silk, screens off the first-born sun.

TO HIS NEPHEW  
ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL FOR EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN

Ratface in the lamplight rocks,  
Rocks. . . . rooted in his own shadow.  
Balder than a mushroom, longfaced

And sloopshouldered, small, small,  
Crafty. . . . but blocked by the rising  
Red sky: Ratface flounders at sea,

See Ratface. This is Ratface. Run,  
Ratface, run. . . . The very devil  
Damns your dreams of lost Atlantis,

And before long, my hair will go  
This strange man thinks; and if he could,  
He would link into ladders your rubber sheets,  
Flee with you to France, and by your side, frame  
And fight the Napoleonic Wars.

## DAYLIGHT

lolls upon his desk.  
Sticky in steaming curls,  
washed out, the thick, thin girl  
who shuffles to his side  
unleashes, in her eyes,  
in how she ducks, shunts, shies,  
the hell she sics on him.  
(Christ. Nightly clutched,  
in wordless dreams, she is made  
Athena, fierce Lady of Freshmen Themes.)  
He listens to her tears,  
and the class bell buzzes.  
He sees, looking beyond her cursed whining eyes,  
sun grazing on the dying grass.

## TO HIS WIFE

His wife is dead.

He is divorced

From what she said,

From what she read:

Trollope, Roth,

Ruth. Bless Ovid.

He feels no pity,

Neither remorse;

But why has he got

This ache in his head?

## THE NIGHT AFTER CHRISTMAS

Clearing a space on the windshield,  
He angles down this winding street  
Toward Park, and curses the fool speed  
Limit that hounds him in to heel.  
He can hardly see in the middle ground  
Those mangy azaleas, whipped by the sleet;  
Or make out where the clouds have wheeled.

At the end of the road, does he wonder  
Resentfully, bitching  
That he knocks too late, the given-up guest,  
Why air, rain, fire, fate and the snowbound earth  
Should forever steal his thunder.



O to have been Ben ben Bijn!

WORKING ON THESE A YEAR FOR THE LAKESIDE

WIND FROM THE NORTH

LIKE AN OLD GOAT GRAZING

A TRAIL BUCKS HIM ASIDE

THE WIND FROM THE NORTH

LIKE AN OLD GOAT

GRAZING

A TRAIL

BUCKS HIM ASIDE

THE WIND FROM THE NORTH

LIKE AN OLD GOAT GRAZING

A TRAIL BUCKS HIM ASIDE

THE WIND FROM THE NORTH

LIKE AN OLD GOAT GRAZING

A TRAIL

BUCKS

HIM ASIDE

THE WIND

FROM THE NORTH

LIKE AN OLD

GOAT GRAZING

A TRAIL

BUCKS

HIM ASIDE

## DRUNK, HE SHEDS A TEAR FOR THE LANDSCAPE

Here lies no one,  
only the drab  
delta, lowering  
and sullen and dumb,  
by down-  
pours, over-  
flows,  
beat and stopped;  
and near the river's mouth,  
lies rudderless, lies unmanned,  
a drabber craft--not  
moored, not  
salvaged, only--  
lonely--  
beached.  
Beached.

"Let the earth/Which has borne us all,  
bear you."

HIS STONED YOUNGER COLLEAGUE  
IN ENGLISH  
SPEAKS

When I review myself, I wink.  
Steve Link is a ballsy fink.

How sad I am on Sunday.  
I tend to drink.

I tend to drink.  
In Camp I coo  
To my wife.

"You've got that, what we ain't got any,  
You're my Little Orphan Annie."

I scan her dogeared eyes; Ben.  
So then she strips.

Weekly.

Come Monday,  
I needs wise rise  
To torture the truth of Kafka's lies.

...AND BENJAMIN JOHN  
LOOKS TO HIMSELF

The figgly wars  
that gobbled me  
have passed away  
from gluttony  
and a weak heart.  
I'm tart.

## A VISION

Light spread on shade,  
Riding the wide wind down,  
The Greek green queen streams  
Suddenly like a falling star.  
She sighs like a tired avatar.

In her fire-eating face, signs  
Of use: what waxy vein! sunken  
Cheek: his darling bright chick

Who from peck-pecking at her mirror  
Fell prey for her own shrunk shrine.  
The white line of her neck droops,

And still, slyly, unseen,  
He flicks her a kind kiss.  
Besides, she owes him that  
For what she made him miss.

But wasn't pain sweet?

But doesn't she tax his patience now they meet?

The lady ever wore her hair upswept  
Coiled to spring  
Like a green snake  
Rattling among rocks.

What good does it do us to mourn  
For our sons when the immortal  
Gods are powerless to save  
Their own children from death?

--Antipatros

# OCTOBER

GENTLE and without warning

ELEGANT

--like a small girl sidney in velvet beret--  
 fitfully,

light rain at evening sprays

his storm window: his studio window.

His son-in-law, gray-haired, lantern-jawed,

thin, hands him his glass: grave, GRAVE

boy of fifty years;

chee. Did sons-in-law like this one FERRET  
 for--god knows, god knows what they hunt for  
 in a dead wife's father. He objects (bearing  
 the glass and his to his ONE-man's bar),

he has his own teaser: but what screwed son-  
 in-law could see, no man is a man

until he like bow-legged Sarasate can bandy  
 an OLD tune about/in double time.

(He shrugs) And (He shrugs) he has no words.

He was born knowing none

and has SHUFFLED into his last years



knowing none  
and cares less. How then should he content  
a shook son-in-law who never trembled  
nor giggled  
when Markos, as was right,  
as was FINE,  
rightly concluded:

So pour the whiskey and kiss my wife or yours.

Or did both women, hand-in-hand  
Sometime ago, fanning out their long dark hair,  
Rise wheeling through the night air,  
And turn south, and disappear....

Breaking out his better Scotch,  
He scans himself in the mirror,  
Mirror, on the wall;  
He is not, now, surprised  
By love or death or by the startling, silky  
Rain or the Fall;

And anyway (cheering  
His own face and its workable disguise),  
His turn, his turn will come; and dead,  
Even this fool will have time to grow wise.  
He draws the brown study drapes

Against the rain....

He draws the brown drapes

...rain, what remarkable...(sighs)

What rain....

What rain....

"What, Tom? I guess I was thinking  
About something.

Yes.

Yes. No, no; nothing.

It wasn't anything."

## THE ROSE-LIPT GIRLS

Each day the past seems longer ago:  
Facts, faces, figures, fade  
And perhaps he is not unafraid  
At night, that they were never so:  
Or where could all those flowers go?  
...The wind in the willows, brushing  
The moon, spanking the wild roses,  
Foreshadows their full eclipse.

But for every Beauty he's forgotten,  
There were two he kissed.

## A BY-LINE: ON HIS CANCER

Wife and mother, father, brother,  
Each in death dispraises me.

At sunup, I start on scrambled eggs  
And Old Crow: the bright sun brazes me  
Into the model of an old man  
At breakfast: but nothing dismays me,  
Not truth nor art. Only that I own  
Time still, and solitude, amazes me.

The trellis roses, damp, bud. I see  
The milkman making rounds. Dear stern friends,  
--It's nothing new, being without them--  
In my turn, I've grown a secret fondness for  
--Later on I'll prune the sycamore--  
This oddest of my maladies that stays with me.

"The stars this night, get up, get up,"

--Robert Marvell

Thursday

This room, also, has its view: and I have seen

I have seen my dear, sweet, little wife

long ago, when I was so long absent from her

and I guess the yellow pillow of my bed

I want to say, I want to say to you

I want to say, I want to say to you

AN OPPOSITION OF STARS

# AN OPPOSITION OF STARS

My Love is of a birth as rare

As 'tis for object strange and high:

It was begotten by Despair

Upon Impossibility.

--Andrew Marvell

Friday

And late in the afternoon, while I was sleeping,

My Love is of a birth as rare

As 'tis for object strange and high:

It was begotten by Despair

Upon Impossibility.

Saturday

Dear, I have heard you calling me at night

## WIDOW

"She does this some nights, gets mixed up."

--Robert Watson

1. Thursday

This room, also, has its view: and from my bed,  
I observe my dear, absent Allen smile too  
Damn shiningly. Well, his father, my husband, was dead  
Long ago, whom I was so long almost faithful to....  
Did I press the yellow pillow slips tonight?  
I meant to; or, I meant myself to put out the light.

2. Snapshot, 1945

My Butterfly Boy, Private First Class, flies, flits  
From bar to bar, glancing upon the flowers  
Of Tokyo; and when he's old he sits  
By his small fire, robbing dreams from the crushed hours.

3. July, 1953

And late in the afternoon, while I was sleeping,  
Content with lunch, dumb, and deadened by crowds  
Of guests, a storm came up, and I woke to watch  
The wind churn the creamy sky into clouds.

4. Thursday

Death, I have heard you calling me at length.

Your tired voice touches me still, despite miles,  
despite years.  
Enough. I'll give you myself in one succinct  
Reply, and with me, my useless smiles, my tired tears.

## THE PHILOSOPHER TO HIS MISTRESS

So-- Night again.

Black clouds again,

And rain again.

Your thick uncombed hair--.

Unfurled on the pillow.

I am used to this.

And to the slow shadows

Erasing your face. . . .

The stars blotted out. . . .

I am used to this.

--Darkness.

While across the world, in Moscow,

Peking, people hail the new day.

Nothing I say holds forever,

Or even for one simple, usual NIGHT.

Your black invisible hair,

Blinding.

Darling, don't--

Ask me no questions,



And I'll tell you no lies.

(But if once I was young,  
Time flies.)

But you are, don't you?

That I'm too, in the end, isn't it?

Everything can be traced to that.

People follow their bliss, like that.

Some devour one another.

While I, a very devoted mother,

Look them to their ruin.

Once I heard a song.

Reached in a minor key.

From an olive-skinned lady.

Just, and sweet and young.

Trying to remember it.

I could tell you stories

And things. The whole world wide.

But why should I bother?

I'd rather drink.

## THE MAN IN THE BAR

Jonah, Job, Jeremiah  
(A consummate liar),  
Plagued by the Woes,  
Worried into Art--

But you see, don't you,  
That I'm too, in the end, smart:  
Everything can be traced to that.  
People fall into place, like that,

Ideas devour one another,  
While I, a very devoted mother,  
Rock them to their ruin.  
Once I heard a song,

Patched in a minor key  
From an onion-skinned lady's  
Past, and spent two years  
Trying to remember it.

I could tell you stories  
And things. The widows would wink.  
But why should I bother?  
I'd rather drink.

## SONG OF THE RAKE

You're fat!

You're thin!

You're out!

You're in!

I'm hot--

I'm cold--

I'm not--

I'm not old--

## AT MARDI GRAS I UNMASK MY PARTNER

1

Waltzing down Canal, I complain  
That I have lost my mind again.

Dunked into buttercups, drowned  
Quickly in quicksand, spilled  
Over sugarcane, I was: tumbled  
Among the weeds, drunk, and sluiced for sport.

(Oh I would my name were Sally Port! . . .)

But:

Look at me! how now the barmaid flies  
Up Bourbon Street to Paradise;

How, sunk in satin, I rise,  
Buoyed by my queenly guise;

How, gauze-gilled, I escape this seascape  
To peer First Lady-like, framed, mounted,

From a superior view; how, engulfed in stripes,  
I am hoisted acock: adieu--As high as a kite,

I graze comets, whack stars,  
Lurch over Venus, lie under Mars.

This is no dream:

I scud across Sycamore, meet a masked man,  
Ask myself: Shall I catch as I can?

He is slim, arch, debonair, sartorial: robed

In the long friends.

I wave my hair,

I flash sequins,

Paste brilliants,

A rhinestone ring.

I curtsey; he bows; I pirouette;

My mind flags. The sky and the sea

Juggle my senses, and senselessly,

I curtsey; he bows; I dip;

He scoops me to his arms, and I,

Starlike, spangle the sky.

2

Give me time to catch my breath,

Say Goodnight to one or two friends,

Say a prayer for some few sins

I had forgot: and do a proper penance

## A POET'S ADVICE

For those others I've kept remembrance.

Give me time to catch my breath:

Not every day do I dance with death.

Will you be at my

By stepping on cracks.

Always I keep

Thirteen working days

To mend my ways.

## A POET'S ADVICE

By night I count sheep;

Stars in the day.

(The former for sleep.)

Hold madness at bay

By stepping on cracks.

Always I keep

Thirteen barking dogs

To tend my sheep.